





Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2011 with funding from  
Boston Library Consortium Member Libraries

<http://www.archive.org/details/capitalistmaster00davi>

HB31  
M415  
no. 134

working paper  
department  
of economics

CAPITALIST MASTERS, BOURGEOIS SLAVES

Paul A. David and Peter Temin

Number 134

July 1974

massachusetts  
institute of  
technology

50 memorial drive  
cambridge, mass. 02139

MASS. INST. TECH.  
AUG 20 '74  
DEWEY LIBRARY

CAPITALIST MASTERS, BOURGEOIS SLAVES

Paul A. David and Peter Temin

=

Number 134

July 1974

This review essay is scheduled to appear in the Winter 1974/75 issue  
of the Journal of Interdisciplinary History.

The views expressed herein are the authors' responsibility and do not  
reflect those of the Department of Economics nor of the Massachusetts  
Institute of Technology.

CAPITALIST MASTERS, BOURGEOIS SLAVES

by

Paul A. David and Peter Temin

Time on the Cross<sup>1</sup> is an ambitious, complex and imposing book. Read at one level it offers a re-evaluation of chattel slavery in America as a social and economic institution. The focus here is macroeconomic, attempting to appraise the functioning of the system by considering its material consequences. While anathematizing the subjection of men to the will of other men as a categorically immoral arrangement, Fogel and Engerman simultaneously depict the capitalistic form of slavery found in North America in terms which make it appear economically functional and even socially benign. It was conducive, they say, to the efficient organization of agriculture, to rapid economic growth in the ante bellum South, and to material treatment of the enslaved which was not only humane, but which compared favorably to the conditions afforded free workers during the nineteenth century.

Read at another level, Time on the Cross presents a bold re-interpretation of the motivations and behavior of the personae of a drama that many generations of historians and readers of American history have found enduringly compelling and disturbing. In quest of "an accurate historical image of the black man," the authors challenge previous portrayals,

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on the Cross, Vol. I: The Economics of American Negro Slavery, 286 pp. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. \$8.95; Vol. II: Evidence and Methods--A Supplement, 267 pp. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, \$12.50.

rejecting most forcefully the dual view of the masters as "vile" because they were perpetrators of unbridled exploitation, and of the slaves as "vile" because they were its victims. (Vol. I, pp. 108, 109) Gone is Simon Legree, and with him the serio-comic figure of Sambo, who Stanley Elkins saw as a distorted personality, a psychologically infantilized "inmate" of the plantation. But gone also is the patriarchal Cavalier so fondly drawn by Phillips school, and the uncompliant yet not openly rebellious black who, in Kenneth Stampp's narrative, remained "a troublesome property."<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with their account of the system as functionally benign, Fogel and Engerman present characters who appear animated by simple interests and impulses which the forces of the market are readily able to render harmonious. Slave-owners, they say, were not "Cavalier fops" but "hard, calculating businessmen"; "shrewd capitalistic businessmen" who treated slaves with "paternalism" only when it made good business sense to do so. And "the superior management of planters" was matched by "the superior quality of black labor" as shown by "slave teamwork, coordination, and intensity of effort" as well as by "the responsiveness of the [slave] workers" who "competed for [skilled] jobs." Slaves were, in short, "diligent and efficient workers," who, being "imbued like their

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery, A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959; Ulrich B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918; Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956.

masters with a Protestant ethic," strove "to develop and improve themselves in the only way that was open to them." (Vol. I, pp. 73, 150, 201, 205, 210, 231-32, 263.)

An unprepared reader may well find himself being swept along by the sheer boldness of the authors' revisionism, by the intimidating fervor with which the claims on behalf of their quantitative methodology are advanced and the limitations of conventional history are derided, and by the righteous passion with which it is argued that their account--being derived by social science and purified of the racist ideology which taints most previous historical writing--reveals at last "the true nature of the slave system." (Vol. I, p. 232) In the end, however, Time on the Cross will be remembered as an unsatisfactory and profoundly disappointing book.

As a work of technical economic history, the undocumented and unannotated "primary volume" is unsatisfactory in failing to provide readers with a basis for exercising critical judgments about the methods, evidence and reasoning that underlie the text. On closer inspection of the supporting second volume it is found that the authors' most novel and notable assertions regarding the consequences of slavery (in terms of the material treatment of the slaves and the efficiency of the productive activities in which they were engaged) do not have a solid, scientifically incontrovertible basis in "fact". Curiously, and rather paradoxically, in order to evaluate the "performance" of the economic system based on this peculiar institution, the authors adopt a framework of analysis that leads them

systematically to overlook the economic essence of slavery, namely that the slaves lost the freedom to exercise choices as producers and consumers. These criticisms have been fully adumbrated elsewhere, and it seems neither necessary nor proper to recapitulate them here.<sup>1</sup>

But what of the second level of reinterpretation which the book has advanced? Taken as a more general historical account of the experience of slavery at the microcosmic level, Time on the Cross must be said to have pressed behavioralist social science to its natural limits, and then beyond. There are two distinguishable aspects of Fogel and Engerman's re-portrayal of the masters and slaves of the ante bellum South: the factual description and the moral judgment. Although these tend to run together in the authors' prose, the description of the way people acted and the imputation of motives consistent with those actions can be assessed as historical statements; they should stand quite independently of the implicit and explicit ethical judgments which the authors' express about the propriety of the modes of behavior they see as characterizing the various players in this drama.

---

<sup>1</sup>P. A. David and P. Temin, "Slavery: The Progressive Institution?", Journal of Economic History, Vol. 34, No. 3 (September 1974), examines critically the evidence and methods described by the second volume of Time on the Cross, and considers their relationship to the assertions made in the "primary" volume with regard to the economic consequences of slavery. The present review concentrates on the use made of this evidence in Volume I, particularly in the characterizations drawn of masters and slaves. In both places we pass lightly over the demographic evidence and the conclusion which Fogel and Engerman have drawn from it, as these aspects of the book receive close examination elsewhere. Cf. M. Vinovskis, "Demography and Slavery, or Somesuch Title," THIS JOURNAL, and H. Guttman, "Review of Time on the Cross," Journal of Negro History [forthcoming].

In their recasting, putting it starkly, slaveholders appear as indistinguishable from pure economic men. If they act benevolently, even compassionately towards their human chattel, it is not out of patriarchal commitment but because the workings of capitalism in a highly competitive industry happened to make such behavior most profitable, and because "the market" would have punished those owners who indulged in or failed to prevent the abusive treatment of their slaves. This conception has by now acquired a patina of familiarity among economic historians, if not among historians in general. Fogel and Engerman, however, do not stop with the bourgeoisification of the southern slavocracy. For they hold that the slaves, too, learned to respond to a range of economic incentives that was created for them, seeking extra income, leisure, and occupational advance through cooperation and identification with the economic interests of their masters. In the underlying motivation of its members, then, the black slave community portrayed by Fogel and Engerman is thoroughly bourgeois, as much a part of capitalist society as was the white slave-owning class.

This new conception of the slave community is central to Fogel and Engerman's announced purpose in writing the book. In the epilog they say:

We have attacked the traditional interpretation of the economics of slavery...in order to strike down the view that black Americans were without culture, without achievement, and without development for their first two hundred years on American soil. (Vol. I, p. 258)

But Time on the Cross is not concerned with works of black writers and preachers of religion. It does not comment on the developments under slavery that led to the black tradition of work songs and to the evolution of jazz. Although the word "culture" is used, it is used in a very limited sense. The major part of "the record of black achievement under adversity" which the book claims to have revealed (Vol. I, p. 264), consists simply in the alleged ability of black slaves to fully internalize the Protestant work ethic and the mores of Victorian family life, to assimilate and function within a market-oriented society, and--even though largely confined to the lowest levels of the socio-economic hierarchy--to successfully strive to make a profit for the enterprises which depended upon their exertions.

This remarkable behavioral account, if it is accepted, must raise for social historians a host of difficult problems concerning the integrity of the slave personality and of black culture in America, as well as some questions about the relationship between the inner motives and outward mores of the slave-owning southern gentry. And then there are the obtrusive ethical problems, which become only more acute when all the actors in the tragedy are portrayed as creatures of rational volition. Can one say what is fit and proper behavior for individuals caught up within a coercive institutional situation? Or should we simply be content to struggle to comprehend the fragility of the human personality and to articulate the nature of the dilemmas continually created by the lordship-bondage relationship? Any historical work, and certainly a work of economic history might be readily forgiven having left unresolved the question of what is

meant by the statement of a man that he was a "good" master, or of another that he was a "good" slave. Time on the Cross, however, lies at the opposite pole. Far from leaving the moral issues unresolved, Fogel and Engerman unhesitatingly pronounce judgments which reflect a particular viewpoint. The morality of individuals' behavior within the context of American slavery is for them a seemingly straightforward matter. The actions of slave-owners were economically self-serving, and however paternal or compassionate some masters (or all) might have appeared, they remain "mean" and unworthy of moral approval as a group. (Cf., e.g. Vol. I, p. 108) Yet the active cooperation they supposedly managed to elicit from slaves who sought material self-improvement in "the only way that was open to them" is treated as a fitting subject for modern black pride.

The moral issues, however, are rather more complex than this. We shall shortly see that there is a close connection between one's perceptions of the objective conditions of bondage and the ethical standards one might wish to apply in judging what is "good" and "bad" behavior in masters and slaves. But before taking up these vexed questions, it is necessary to point out that as a piece of descriptive history, Fogel and Engerman's account of the motivation and behavior of masters and slaves is itself none too firmly based.

For the most part the picture of individual behavior and the characterization of individual motivation presented by Time on the Cross rests on little direct evidence. The authors are strict behaviorists in eschewing the personal testimony of masters and narratives of former slaves

on such matters, except to cite the occasional illustrative anecdote--presumably it is not important to mention the sources of these anecdotes because they are not really introduced as evidence. Behavioralists, however, might be expected to identify statistically representative patterns of individual action before advancing models designed to rationalize them. Fogel and Engerman make no systematic use of observations on individual slave-owners, or slaves in this connection; instead, they venture to infer representative modes of action from the conclusions they reach concerning the outcomes of market and non-market processes in which the individuals participated. Thus it is their "findings" about the profitability, the comparative productive efficiency and the relatively favorable economic condition of the workers under slavery, which are used to project the image of plantations as "factories" manned by industrious, self-improving blacks under the direction of profit-maximizing captains of agriculture. The second level at which Fogel and Engerman dispute previous ("traditional") interpretations of slavery is, in other words, arrived at by extended inferences from the first level.

Even if one were prepared to accept on faith the latter body of "findings", doubts would remain about the methodological legitimacy of the uses to which they are put. As a case in point, take the profitability evidence. Since the path-breaking work of Conrad and Meyer,<sup>1</sup> there has been general agreement among economic historians on the private profitability

---

<sup>1</sup>A. H. Conrad and J. R. Meyer, "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South," Journal of Political Economy, Vol. 66 (April 1958), pp. 95-130.

of investment in the acquisition of Negro slaves in the ante bellum South. But in treating the behavior of slave-owners, Fogel and Engerman not only tell us that such profitable activities were undertaken for profit; they use the unrejected hypothesis of planter profit maximization as a basis for inferring that practises which would not have been profitable to slave-owners were not followed.

From Harold Woodman's<sup>1</sup> penetrating review of earlier work on slavery by Fogel and Engerman, readers of this JOURNAL have learned that it is not legitimate to infer the motivations of individuals from evidence about the outcome of a market process as a whole. Given information about the motivation of individuals, or behavioral rules, the shape of the market's equilibrium can be deduced. But it is not valid to reverse the direction of the logical inference because there are in general many other sets of individual behavioral rules that would be consistent with the same equilibrium configuration.

Consider the situation of the "agricultural capitalist" envisaged by Fogel and Engerman (Vol. I, p. 232). He viewed slaves as just another productive asset and sought to use all his assets in ways that would be most profitable. For any given price of slaves, there were some uses in which they could be profitably employed and others in which they could not. As the price of slaves rose, the former group of uses shrank in relation to the latter group, and therefore the number of slaves demanded by him fell.

---

<sup>1</sup>H. D. Woodman, "Economic History and Economic Theory: The New Economics History in America," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol. III (Autumn 1972), pp. 323-50.

At any given price of slaves our agricultural capitalist would continue to acquire slaves up to the point at which the profit rate from owning slaves had been forced into equality with the prevailing rate of return on other (equally risky) assets.

The demand schedule for the services of slave labor thus defined did not, however, determine the price of slaves; prices are determined by the intersection of supply and demand schedules. What was the supply schedule facing the class of agricultural capitalists? If no-one who was not of this disposition held slaves, the supply schedule would simply be the number of slaves in the South at the given point in time. On the other hand, if there were people who held slaves with reasons other than profit maximization in mind--whether they were "Cavalier fops", drunken sadists, or masters who loved their mulatto offspring more than money--then the number of slaves available to the agricultural capitalist type of owner would be restricted to those not already reserved for the diverse purposes of other groups. Yet even "Cavalier fops" must face the harsh realities of a limited budget. Having finite financial resources, the would-be patrician who is ready to live up to (if not for a time beyond) his means will be responsive to the prices of slaves in the following sense: on average he would hold more slaves were slaves cheap (vis-a-vis other things) than he would were slaves relatively dear. The supply of slaves facing the "agricultural capitalist" class of owner therefore

may be thought of as varying in the normal way, positively with the price of slaves.<sup>1</sup>

If the market for slaves was in equilibrium, the allocation of the slave population between "agricultural capitalists" and "Cavalier fops" represented a point that was simultaneously on the slave-demand and the slave-supply curves just discussed. To describe that allocation one needs to know the shape and positions of this pair of curves, not just the price at which they intersected. By itself, the observation that owners of slaves could earn a market rate of return on their investment at the prevailing price tells us only that the "agricultural capitalists" as a group were in equilibrium, i.e., on their demand schedule. It cannot tell us that the specific point on their demand curve was one that left no significant portion of the slave

---

<sup>1</sup>This is equivalent to saying that the number of slaves reserved for the use of "non-capitalistic" owners varied inversely with the price of slaves, tracing out the normal, downward-sloping demand curve. The supply schedule facing the "capitalist" class of owners and the "reservation" demand schedule of the "non-capitalist" class are two sides of the same coin, they are complements of each other. It is not necessary to assume individual rational utility-maximizing behavior in order to conclude that the (reservation) demand for slaves by the class of non-capitalist slaveholders will exhibit the usual properties of a demand curve. Cf. Gary S. Becker, "Irrational Behavior and Economic Theory," Journal of Political Economy, Vol. 70, (February 1962) pp. 1-13, and more generally, Warren C. Sanderson, "Does the Theory of Demand Need the Maximum Principle?" in Nations and Households in Economic Growth, P. A. David and M. W. Reder (eds.), New York, 1974, pp. 173-221.

population in the hands of irrational, non-economic men.<sup>1</sup> Fogel and Engerman may well be correct in their assertion: "The demand of those slaveowners who desired to hold slaves for conspicuous consumption was quite small relative to the total demand for slaves." (Vol. I, p. 71) But the basis for this statement is not disclosed, and it cannot have been inferred simply from observations of profit rates. That slave prices were consistent with market rates of return being earned by owners of that asset tells us that the economy was operating at a point on the "agricultural capitalists' " demand curve, and that there were at least a few such holders of slaves in the market. It fails to illuminate the motives of the typical slaveholder.

The illegitimate methodological device of arguing from information about rates of return to conclusions about the behavior and motivation of representative individuals reappears throughout Time on the Cross. And when the authors reverse direction to suggest that since there was no profit to be gained from changing the extent of some activity it would not have been undertaken at all, they ignore both the existing scale of activity that had brought the rate of return down to the prevailing market level, and the possibility that non-pecuniary motives may have been widely indulged at the expense of private profits or even long run survival in the industry. Fogel and Engerman's argument that there was no commercial

---

<sup>1</sup>Fogel and Engerman say: "The discovery of a high and persistent rate of profit on slaves constitutes a serious, and probably irreparable, blow to the thesis that the price of slaves was largely attributable to conspicuous consumption." (Vol. I, p. 70) In the context of the present discussion it is clear that this is a blow which misses the target. We have seen that the behavior of the group who held slaves for conspicuous consumption motives would establish the supply curve facing "agricultural capitalist" demanders of slaves. It does not make economic sense to speak of the price as having been determined more by one group (Cavalier fops concerned with conspicuous consumption) rather than the other "agricultural capitalist), when it is their interaction that establishes the price.

slave-breeding is a particularly striking instance of the practice of using the hypothesized dominance of profit-maximizing motives to generate factual assertions about what was and was not representative behavior on the part of planters in dimensions other than their investment portfolio choices.<sup>1</sup>

The notion that slaves were reared with a view to future sale, and that the social arrangements of plantations and even the sexual lives of the Negroes were manipulated toward this end, are described by Fogel and Engerman as deriving largely from "unverified charges made by abolitionists." (Vol. I, p. 78) To explode this "myth" the authors report N. G. Butlin's<sup>2</sup> finding that in the Old South, the supposed "breeding region", "the rates of return on men and women [slaves] were approximately the same." (Vol. I, p. 79) But in a competitive market, two assets of comparable riskiness should earn the same rate of profit regardless of the specific uses to which they are put. The finding therefore can only show that the slave market was in equilibrium; it cannot tell us whether or not the equilibrium was one in which women were extensively used in bearing children rather than in field-work. Fogel and Engerman go on to say that the "systematic" breeding thesis is implausible because the extra profit to be gotten from (further)

---

<sup>1</sup>In addition to the illustrative passages of the text discussed below, compare Fogel and Engerman's (parallel) arguments on the use of slave wenches in commercial prostitution (Vol. I, p. 135), and on the administration of whippings and other punishments (Vol. I, p. 147). In both instances the only direct evidence introduced consists of an isolated document, from which material has been extracted with questionable selectivity.

<sup>2</sup>N. G. Butlin, Ante-bellum Slavery. Canberra: Department of Economic History, Australian National University, 1971.

increasing the fertility of female slaves was trivial, "less than a dollar per year per slave." (Vol. I, p. 83) Again, if the market was in the neighborhood of a competitive equilibrium, there would be little opportunity for making profits by altering prevailing practices. This kind of evidence may be held to show that the market was near equilibrium, but it does not illuminate the practices of slaveowners which brought it into such a state, nor can it suffice to establish the absence of slave breedings.<sup>1</sup>

Similar defects flaw Fogel and Engerman's portrayal of the slaves, who are said to have responded reliably to pecuniary incentives (not the lash) in respect to work effort and job advancement. Much is made of the fact, itself scarcely novel, that within the plantation labor force as well as within the slave population as a whole there existed

---

<sup>1</sup>Fogel and Engerman also reject (without explicit reference or text discussion) the demographic data compiled by Richard Sutch on the existence of slave plantations with unbalanced sex ratios. (Vol. I, pp. 78-79) Later they say that it would have been irrational for a planter to have a slave population with unbalanced sex ratios because fertility rates were lower on plantations with unbalanced sex ratios than on those with balanced ratios. (I, p. 83) But, in addition to depending upon the premise of rational profit-maximization, this argument confuses maximizing fertility with maximizing profits. There seems to have been a cost to having unbalanced sex ratios; fertility dropped. But there was also an obvious benefit; you needed to have fewer costly males. And if a slave breeder was located in the Old South, where cotton farming could not pay for the male slave, the benefit could be larger than the cost. See R. Sutch, "The Breeding of Slaves for Sale and the Westward Expansion of Slavery, 1850-1860," in S. Engerman and E. Genovese (eds.), Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere (Princeton, 1974).

an occupational pyramid to which there corresponded a complex social hierarchy. What is new is the inference the authors have drawn in recognizing from this

...the existence of a flexible and exceedingly effective incentive system that operated within the framework of slavery....In slave, as in free society, positive incentives in the form of material rewards, were a powerful instrument of economic and social control. Although slavery restricted economic and social mobility for blacks, it did not eliminate it. (Vol. I, pp. 40-41, emphasis added.)

The theoretical argument behind this statement confuses cause and effect. While individual economic mobility in an open, meritocratic society does typically generate a socio-economic hierarchy, the existence of the latter hardly implies the operation of processes of occupational selection having the characteristics of free-market competition. Selection based on ascriptive attributes equally can generate an occupational pyramid; the army too has its functional ranks and social hierarchy. Elsewhere in the book it is noticed that the rules for occupational transitions within the matrix of the slave system may have diverged in important respects from those which characterized the rest of nineteenth century American society.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It is reported that slave artisans, and others occupying jobs requiring some training beyond that acquired in field-work, were considerably older than the working population of the plantations as a whole. (Vol. I, pp. 150; Vol. II, pp. 117-118) This may have reflected the practise of awarding older slaves, of proven loyalty, by elevating them to prestigious and physically less onerous pursuits. (It also may have reflected the fact that the labor force make-up of the particular plantations studies had not settled down to anything resembling a self-perpetuating steady-state distribution. This latter possibility is not considered by Fogel and Engerman, but it should induce considerable caution in reaching for inferences about persisting selection practices on the basis of such evidence.) In any event, the attributes on the basis of which older slaves were selected for further training need not have been correlated with the criteria generally used in screening young free worker, who present themselves for training so that they may derive its benefits over a greater part of their life span.

But this does not suggest to Fogel and Engerman that the incentives, and the slaveowners' presumptions about the responsiveness and dependability of potential candidates for 'occupational advancement' which those incentives reflected, may have been quite different from those found where workers are free.

To press the point still further, the evidence that slaves responded to preferred opportunities for job-training is subject to Woodman's objections to the use made of profitability findings. Aggregate data can indicate that there were indeed some slaves who rose to positions of skill and responsibility, perhaps stimulated by material incentives. But data on the composition of the labor force cannot show how numerous were the "highly responsive" compared with the rest; one must be told something about the supply of job-slots with specified performance standards, and the strength of the existing inducements--material and other--to escape the lot of the ordinary field hand. And as for the new evidence Fogel and Engerman offer to support their assertions about the revealed diligence and efficiency of slave labor in plantation tasks, it is all indirect inference from their questionable calculation of the overall productivity of slave agriculture compared with free farming.<sup>1</sup>

The way the slaves are supposed to have responded to the positive incentives their master devised for maintaining nuclear families, caring for their young, and working diligently, was responsible for the smooth and

---

<sup>1</sup>As is noted above, we have subjected these relative productivity calculations to critical examination elsewhere.

profitable operation of the system of slavery in the ante bellum South. This is seen by Fogel and Engerman as the main "achievement" of the American Negro people in slavery. This is the view which distinguishes their book from every other major study of slavery published during the past three decades; Fogel and Engerman reject not only the Sambo image, but also the conception that it was appropriate for the slaves to have resisted their bondage.

Time on the Cross thus raises a profound moral issue without treating it as such. We can approach the question by considering

the choice faced by a prisoner whose captor has offered him a positive incentive to cooperate in a project of interest to "the authorities". He is asked to put at their disposal some physical or intellectual skill and he must decide whether to cooperate on their terms or to refuse the preferred incentives. The authorities can punish recalcitrant prisoners, but the choice is still the prisoner's. By not revealing the full range of his abilities, even under duress, he may be able to preserve some uncertainty as to the extent to which he is actively cooperating. And the more his captor depends upon him to disclose such unique talents as he may possess, the more discretion he may feel able to exercise in setting some limits on his compliance. What should he do?

There is no general answer to this question. The essential issue arises in many different contexts, and different points of view may well exist about any particular situation. The story of the wartime building of a railway bridge on the River Kwai poses the problem in one form. The captive's dilemma is explored in quite different terms by Solzhenitsyn in The First Circle. Both these stories deal with choices

faced by actual prisoners. But members of some radical workingclass movements have held that the workers are prisoners within the capitalist system ("wage slaves" they used to say), and that rebellion therefore is the more appropriate response to this condition than wage bargaining and cooperation with the bosses. It is not hard to multiply examples, some of which engender agreement about the "proper" course of action, and some of which pose painful dilemmas.

Some broad principles, however, can be extracted from consideration of the general issue. In any given situation involving interaction between people, the choice of non-cooperation and resistance is more appropriate the more the circumstances resemble those of a prison. The choice of compliance and cooperation is more appropriate when the aims of the controlling powers, or even the unintended consequences of their undertakings, correspond to a goal sanctioned by the controlled individuals--or the historian who sits in judgment upon them. But if the rewards for cooperation are recognizably attractive to normal men while the punishments for resistance are horrible, then empathy urges us to suspend judgments on individuals who have been brought to cooperate in acts which are thought to be morally repugnant.

Vague as these general ethical principles may be, they suffice to suggest that Fogel and Engerman's factual assertions--including those regarding the nature of slave family life and the material level at which plantation slaves were maintained--do have a bearing upon their moral evaluation of slaves' performance within the capitalist system as an "achievement under adversity." According to the authors, the conditions of life under

slavery were not so bad and the benefits from revolt, or northward flight into what was for black people a tightly controlled racist society, were small indeed. And as a social organization, Fogel and Engerman say, plantation slavery promoted the desirable goal of economic efficiency. This much seems to suggest that it was more appropriate for the slaves to have sought to work cooperatively within the system, rather than to attempt to resist or flee it. But on the other hand, if slave-owners were as constrained in their behavior by considerations of wealth-maximization, and treated slaves as well as Fogel and Engerman assert, then there were few risks to the slave who temporarily withheld his co-operation or adopted a pattern of behavior which denied his master access to the best of his talents. While the inducement to revolt may have been minimal, it is possible that on most plantations only mild penalties were meted out for subtly insisting upon the non-identity between one's self and the interests of one's owner--by ploughing shallow, picking trashy cotton, leaving gates open, and the like. The moral issue involved in opting to cooperate fully, which is the characterization of slave behavior which Fogel and Engerman seek to put in place of the "day to day resistance" envisaged by Stampp, remains difficult to resolve under the objective circumstances of slavery as these are described by Time on the Cross.

The experience of slavery in America is not so far removed from us in time and space that we can dissect it without personal involvement. It is not like an atom of hydrogen whose "true nature" can be sought and "discovered" as an abstract intellectual exercise. Historians will see reflected in the peculiar institution the social problems and moral

dilemmas of their day. And as Marc Bloch said, this is appropriate for serious history.<sup>1</sup> We can confidently expect that no definitive view will emerge concerning the nature of the "black achievement" under slavery, even when the motives and behavior of the historical participants and the material conditions of plantation life have been established more firmly than they are in Time on the Cross.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft, transl. P. Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

**Date Due**

5/10/67			
			Lib-26-67

MIT LIBRARIES



3 9080 003 923 452

